

Dora the Explorer: America's Bilingual Role Model



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*When Dora the Explorer opens her mouth to speak, American viewers know that words will come out. But in what language? Sometimes English; sometimes Spanish; always joyous in either language. Because Dora is bilingual, proudly so. She is truly America's pre-school champion of bilingualism. From its August 14, 2000, television debut on Nickelodeon, Dora the Explorer has become one of the most-watched pre-school television shows in the United States and wildly popular around the world. A true social phenomenon, Dora graced the cover of the November 11, 2002, issue of *Newsweek*. "Dora the Explorer Live," which opened in 2003, became the Radio City Music Hall's all-time highest-grossing family show. When Dora appeared in the 2005 Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, she represented its first Latina character. Beyond this, Dora has received numerous awards, including the Peabody, Gracie Allen, ALMA, Imagen, Latino Spirit, and NAACP Image awards. Reflecting Dora's penetration into popular culture, she even earned being parodied on Saturday Night Live.*

The Development of Dora

Dora may have gained her greatest renown as America's pre-school Spanish teacher and emissary of bilingualism. However, the show is far more than a series with a bilingual Latina hero. In fact, it is a highly complex show that seamlessly combines entertainment with education. *Dora* was developed through an intensive multi-year process involving both creative and research teams. These teams considered various program concepts and developed a pre-school curriculum based on Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993).

Throughout each season's development and production process, the research team conducts systematic investigation and testing with pre-school children from varied racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, with the creative team making program changes based on their responses. In addition, the project continuously incorporates the advice of educational, language, cultural, music, and other types of consultants.

Program Structure

Central to *Dora* is its narrative structure. To capture and hold viewer attention, each episode involves a high-stakes adventure. Throughout the adventure, viewers are asked to help Dora overcome a series of structured challenges in order to reach her ultimate goal. As explained by co-creator and co-executive producer Chris Gifford, "We wanted to create a show that teaches little kids problem-solving skills...strategies like stopping to think, asking for help, and using what you know are modeled in every *Dora* show" (Nick Jr., 2000).

Central to the show's success, of course, is the charm and

vivacity of its inquisitive, active, determined, bilingual, problem-solving female lead character, seven-year-old Dora Marquez (named in honor of Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez). Encouraged by her familia, she models the importance of dedicating yourself to the task at hand. Moreover, she addresses challenges with careful observation, clear logic, and evidence-based decision-making, while encouraging viewers to join her in her adventures. The paucity of strong female role models on children's television, particularly Latina role models, has helped make Dora a welcome addition. One recent textual analysis concluded that *Dora* is changing the face of children's television while empowering preschoolers, girls, and Latinas in particular. Not only does she encourage them to use her "magic" Spanish words to save the day, but she also uses her gaze and pleas for viewer help to involve her fans (Ryan, in press).

The Use of Spanish

English serves as the show's primary language. Yet what has made the series linguistically notable is that it also encourages and facilitates the learning of Spanish. While the Spanish-teaching dimension of the show benefits children of all backgrounds, it provides a special source of identity for our nation's growing Latino population. (For a sociolinguistic analysis, see Masi de Casanova, 2007).

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The use of Spanish in *Dora* did not come about accidentally. Rather it developed through a serious consideration of options, the weighing of different perspectives, and a set of decisions that reflected both pedagogical and social concerns. According to Valeria Lovelace, *Dora*'s Research and Curriculum Development Consultant, "In the initial stages of script development, *Dora*'s main role was to translate for monolingual Spanish-speaking characters. Based on advice from consultants, her role was dramatically expanded so that she used her bilingualism in more multidimensional ways and as an assertion of pride in being Latina (Lovelace, 2009)."

In a magical world inhabited mainly by monolinguals, *Dora* became the embodiment of the value of speaking more than one language. As such, she became the series' linguistic and cultural bridge builder between English and Spanish monolingual characters, as well as an implicit role model of cultural pride (for all people), respect for diversity, and the richness of living in a multicultural world.

In developing *Dora*'s approach to Spanish, at least four major questions had to be addressed?

- (1) How can Spanish be integrated to establish the general tone of the series?
- (2) How can the principle of social equity be maintained in the use of languages — both Spanish and English — throughout the series?
- (3) What pedagogical strategies can be used to most effectively heighten viewer learning of Spanish?
- (4) How can the show continuously deliver its underlying message, "It's good to be bilingual"?

Tone: How can Spanish be integrated to establish the general tone of the series?

Dora's high-stakes adventure takes place in a magical world replete with Latino touches — Spanish language, Latino-themed music, dichos (Latino sayings and proverbs), Dora's warm, embracing Latino extended familia, and Latino settings with people who reflect Latin America's racial and ethnic diversity. The series highlights Dora as pan-Latino rather than emphasizing a specific Latino national origin (Harewood & Valdivia, 2005). Moreover, it emphasizes universal Spanish words and expressions rather than those reflecting only a specific national origin. Language consultant Argentina Ziegler has insured that the Spanish used in the series is appropriate for all Latino cultures. For example, "Claro que sí" and "Por supuesto" are used rather than expressions such as "Seguro," which can be interpreted as meaning secure, safe, or sure.

Spanish is used in two ways. First, certain words and expressions are targeted in the Spanish-language curriculum developed for each season. They are explicitly taught and repeated across episodes.

Second, some words and expressions (such as greetings, casual responses, conversational words, and expressions exchanged between characters) are used but not explicitly taught. Sometimes they are repeated from episode to episode. Such words and phrases include "vámonos," "qué lindo," "hola," "hasta luego," and "salud." "Vámonos" even became a central part of Dora's daily travel song. While these words are not specifically included in the curriculum, it is felt that they might become part of viewers working Spanish vocabulary through repeated hearing and usage. Viewers might informally learn some of those expressions through repetition and, equally important, they should become more comfortable being around languages that they do not fully comprehend.

Equity: How can the principle of social equity be maintained in the use of languages — both Spanish and English — throughout the series?

Spanish and English are presented in a way that affirms both languages as rich systems of communication. When the same word is spoken in both Spanish and English, Spanish is sometimes used first, while at other times English is used first. This indicates that both languages are valuable and worthy of respect. Spanish is not presented as a translation of English. Rather it is rightfully treated as a language that refers directly to the viewer's world. Carlos Cortés, Dora's Creative and Cultural Advisor, remembers the extended discussion about language equity. "We decided to avoid such expressions as 'Dos is the Spanish word for two.' Instead, 'dos' and 'two' are both used to refer directly to a number or to a pair of items on screen, while 'azul' and 'rojo' always refer directly to on-screen colors rather than to the words, 'blue' and 'red' (Cortés, 2009)."

Pedagogy: What pedagogical strategies can be used to most effectively heighten viewer learning of Spanish?

For each year's series, an underlying Spanish curriculum is developed — target words and phrases intended for viewers to learn, practice, and become comfortable in using. To provide reinforcement across episodes, the series emphasizes the repetition of selected words and expressions. As the series has progressed, there has been an increased teaching of longer expressions rather than just single words and the addition of action-related words like "ayúdeme," "salta" and "sube."

In every episode, viewers are asked to draw upon their linguistic intelligence by saying a word or phrase in Spanish to help Dora solve a problem. Usually this occurs in a high-stakes situation that requires Dora to use her Spanish-language abilities and motivates children to say (or attempt to say) the new word or phrase with her or immediately after her. In some cases Spanish becomes one of the driving forces for the entire episode, such as "The Chocolate Tree," in which viewers learn to sing "bate, bate, chocolate."

As a fluent bilingual character, Dora can communicate with both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking monolingual characters and serve as a linguistic bridge between the situation and the viewer. Then she proceeds to teach viewers the Spanish word or phrase required to solve the problem and asks them to say the phrase with her or after her. With the help of viewers' responding in Spanish, the situation is resolved and the adventure continues. Dora thanks the viewer and reinforces their success by lauding them, "Great speaking Spanish."



Some characters, most obviously Dora, are Spanish-English bilinguals; some only speak English (for example, Boots and Benny) and some only speak Spanish (for example, Tico). While the series champions the value of being bilingual, it also demonstrates that monolinguals can learn other languages. The series places special emphasis on the natural learning of language, such as by showing Spanish-speaking Tico learning to speak a bit of English and English-speaking Boots learning to speak a bit of Spanish, thereby encouraging viewers of both language backgrounds. In strengthening this dimension of the series, experienced dual language educators were consulted.

At times Spanish is used without presenting the same idea in English. Those untranslated interjections come in various forms: for example, greetings (buenos días); instructions (corran); exclamations (qué grande, qué divertido, qué día tan chistoso); and expressions of endearment (mis lindos bebés). In this way, the series encourages viewers to try to make sense of Spanish by observing both the context in which the language is used and the things to which words refer. This approach also helps viewers develop greater comfort in everyday life when hearing a language they do not fully understand.

Our internal research as well as letters from parents have revealed a rewarding trend. Over time Dora watchers have indeed become more comfortable about hearing and using a second language. One mother related a story about trying to explain to her Spanish-speaking babysitter to get a salad bowl from the bottom drawer. When the babysitter opened the second to last drawer and the mother's "no, lower" drew no response, her Dora-watching little son interjected, "Just say 'más abajo.'" Misión cumplida.

The Value of Bilingualism: How can the show continuously deliver its underlying message, "It's good to be bilingual"?

Dora does not merely teach some Spanish to young viewers. The series also sends a continuous message of 21st-century empowerment — that it's good to be bilingual. The shows create situations in which Spanish becomes necessary. At such times Dora and viewers must use Spanish to overcome obstacles and meet challenges. In other circumstances, Dora needs both Spanish and English to facilitate communication between monolingual English and Spanish speakers.

Bilingual and cross-culturally flexible, Dora draws upon her knowledge of both Spanish and English to overcome challenges and foster communication among monolingual characters. As a cross-cultural bridge-builder, she fosters teamwork among her diverse compatriots. Through her actions, Dora personifies, models, and reinforces a basic message of the series — you will have more opportunities in life if you learn to speak more than one language and develop an understanding of different cultures.

Dora: A Symbol of the Future

There has been growing global recognition of the value of knowing more than one language. Globalization has increasingly brought together people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, putting a premium on bilingual skills and cross-cultural abilities. When shown in non-English-speaking countries, Dora primarily speaks the language of that nation and secondarily speaks English. By personifying and exemplifying bilingual facility and cross-cultural leadership, Dora has touched a chord among young viewers, who seem to have intuitively grasped the excitement and value of learning to speak more than one language.

Some episodes place special emphasis on Dora's cross-cultural interpersonal intelligence, as she meets young friends of different cultural backgrounds. In the process, she learns cultural knowledge, skills, and practices from her friends. And she also applies this new learning to solving problems that confront her, illustrating the importance of intercultural understanding.

As Mariana Diaz-Wionczek, Director of Research and Development for *Dora* and *Diego*, recalls, "We wanted Dora to embody respectful curiosity for other cultures. Dora has moved beyond being a problem solver in her own magical land to becoming an ambassador to the world (Diaz-Wionczek, 2008)."

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